Student engagement with blended learning: leading the horse to water

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Background
Currently within Leeds Met, there is a desire to move towards more use of information and communication technology [ICT] in assessment, learning and teaching. The underpinning values of the Assessment, Learning and Teaching strategy call for evidence based research to inform professional practice to enable a choice of approaches including ICT. This use of ICT or e-Learning within a teaching scheme is what is usually referred to as blended learning. Oliver and Trigwell (2005, p.17) indicate the most common definition for blended learning is:

"the integrated combination of traditional learning with web-based online approaches"

Alonso et al (2005) state that not enough effort has gone into resolving pedagogical problems with blended learning and e-Learning. To address this knowledge gap, members of the Faculty of Business and Law are undertaking an action research cycle. This small piece of exploratory research was a precursor.

Experiment and Investigation
The authors attempted to review the impact and effectiveness of some chosen ICT [WebCT] tools, techniques and approaches firmly integrated within a large core undergraduate module "Operations Management". In particular, we were interested in student engagement with some current tools, student views of the value of newer techniques and exploring the cultural aspects of using virtual learning environments (VLE's).

The organisation of learning materials was designed to force engagement of students with the VLE by providing all course materials ONLY on WebCT. As many students are strategic learners (Entwistle, 1997), the assessment or revision lecture was broken up and made available only as a podcast to provide a motivating route into the VLE. In summary the main resources used within the WebCT site were:

- Lecture slides (only source)
- Tutorial materials (case studies, exercises)
- Core text website link (quizzes, worked examples)
- Other external links
- Assessment podcasts (hints and tips)
- Module feedback survey
- Teaching scheme
- Module handbook
- Internal links (skills for learning)

These techniques generally fit within Bonk et al's (2004, p. 11) identification of traditional blended learning approaches;

"Extend training events, offer follow-up resources in a community of practice, access guest experts, provide timely mentoring or coaching, present online lab or simulation activities, and deliver pre-work or supplemental course materials."

To assess the impact of this VLE design with the student population the module team used four techniques:

- WebCT usage statistics
- Module survey (on-line)
- Focus group survey questions
- Focus group semi-structured questions

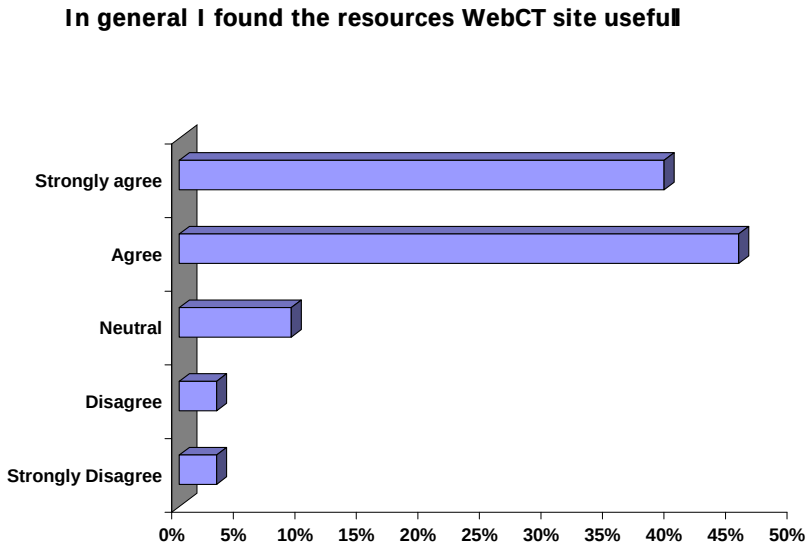
A design limitation of the survey and focus group is that they were both self-selecting volunteers. However the survey contained a wide range of views about the module, and the tutorial groups were randomly selected, even if the focus group from which it came was not. The survey response was 21% from a population size of 190 students. The focus group, which also completed the small group survey, consisted of eight students from one tutorial group of twelve.

Results

76% of students accessed the WebCT site**.** Of the students who did engage, the average number of access "hits" on the website over the semester was 112 and **92%** of these students also continued accessing through December and January.

The main survey question relating to the VLE was "In general I found the resources WebCT site useful". This gave a positive response as indicated in figure 1 below:

Figure 1



While there were negative comments about the module on the survey, there were none about the VLE and plenty of positive views such as:

“WebCT is amazing! By far the best of all the modules”
“WebCT is very useful for referring back to work and helping on the assessment”

The breadth of engagement with the VLE appears high, although we have little data to compare it to. However, looking at the depth of engagement, using the focus group survey and focus group discussions, the picture is different.

From the focus survey question data in table 1, we can see that although students are aware of the resources available, many choose not to use them.

Table 1

	Aware of	Used	Useful
Lecture Slides	88%	50%	88%
Tutorial Material	100%	75%	75%
Core text website link	100%	50%	0%
Other external links	100%	25%	0%
Assessment podcasts	100%	63%	13%
Module feedback survey	100%	75%	38%
Teaching scheme	100%	50%	13%
Module handbook	100%	38%	38%

Current VLE Tools
A feeling amongst some staff in the faculty is that putting teaching material online discourages students from attending. Unfortunately this fear appears to be substantiated by this group of students, one of whom commentated;

“How much do you want people to attend the lecture?”

One student stated that on one or two occasions she

“Didn’t bother getting up as I knew the lectures would be on-line”.

One student indicated that it was not just a matter of student resources;

“The 7 pence to print the lecture slides is not a problem, but it’s the time and effort that puts people off”

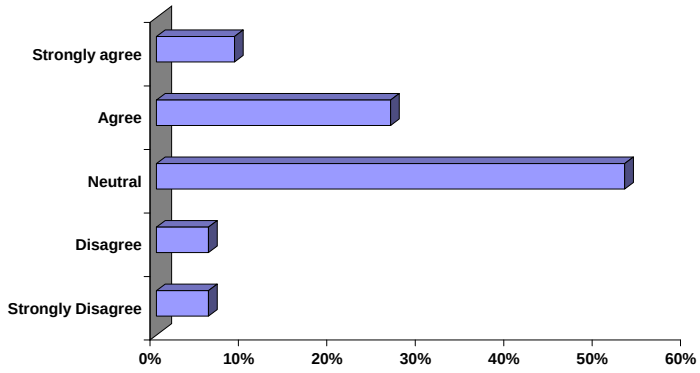
Students were pleased to have the tutorial material published upfront to be able to work through beforehand. However quite a few students admitted that they often didn’t take the time to print off or read material prior to the tutorial. One student felt that having to navigate from one part [lectures files] of the site to another put her off downloading tutorial material.

One surprising result is that the use of external websites was low, especially the core text website, which contains on-line quizzes and worked case examples – something the students indicated they would like to see in future! – The students offered no explanation as to their low engagement in these areas.

The response to the podcasts was mixed, both in the module survey [figure 2] and the focus group. These results are very similar to those presented by Evans and Jones (2006) on a business studies module at a different HE institution.

Figure 2

I listened to the podcasts and found them useful



It appeared from the range of feedback that the idea in principle was good, but the delivery and content would have to be improved to prove valuable to the majority of the students. The response data was potentially marred by the survey asking two questions rather than one.

Future Developments of VLEs

Bostock (2006) refers to the blend of e-Learning being driven by three different types of strategies;

- Deficit –replacing missing elements of the Assessment, Learning and Teaching delivery
- Substitution – replacing current elements of the Assessment, Learning and Teaching delivery
- Enrichment – adding elements to the Assessment, Learning and Teaching delivery

The students in this population seem to view VLE's in the enrichment category, as our students appear not to be impressed with replacing traditional on-site activities with on-line ones:

"In my opinion you come to university to go to lectures and tutorials and to interact with people"
"As a back up but not to replace them"
"I can see these things being useful for supplementary material"

Interestingly, some students seem to view on-line activities as having inferior value to on-site ones, as one student said of the move towards more e-Activities:

"It might as well be a distance learning course"

However, although the students seemed to want enriching supplementary materials, they were cautious and conservative in their response to new e-Learning activities. Their responses to these are shown in table 2 overleaf:

Table 2

On-line Activity	Summary of Responses
Online Quizzes/tests	Would be useful, many students didn't realise facility was already available through the core text website
Online Discussion areas	Felt these would abused and not sure of the value
Online Q&A with tutor	Reasonably well received idea, although only as an addition to tutorials
Tutorial answers on line	Felt this would provide further discouragement from attending teaching sessions
On-line simulations	Were not sure what a "simulation" was, and after clarification were unsure of the value
Student wiki "Subject Glossary"	Many were initially not sure what a "wiki" was and were more comfortable with tutors providing the on-line material.

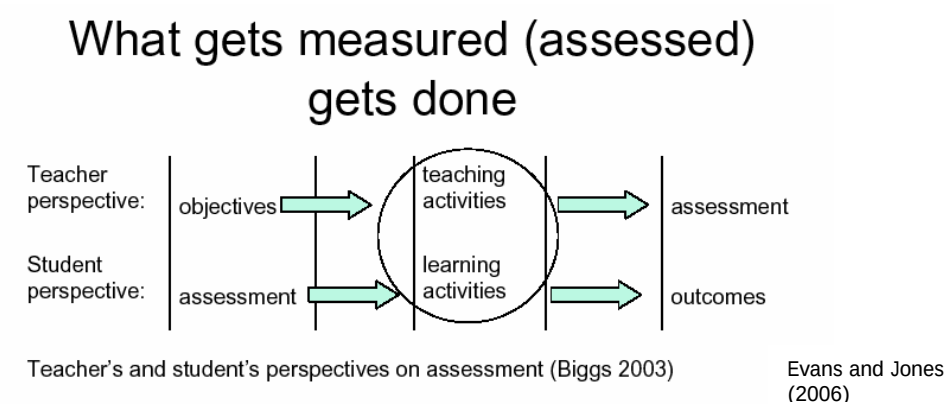
The last point regarding creating a glossary using a wiki was especially interesting as it was included in a discussion about one of the major feedback points about the module – difficulty understanding the terms and language used. Therefore even a direct solution to a known problem was not greeted with significant interest. The students were very interested in tools that would affect their efficiency, for example the idea of submitting work on-line was the most well received idea by far, subject to sufficient confirmation and security processes.

Discussion

This research indicates that there is a significant gap between our technological abilities and the practicalities of engaging students. We can see evidence of the lack of acceptance of both current and future on-line activities from the study.

From the responses to student wikis and online Q & A sessions we can see an indication that students are more comfortable with a more dependant didactic teaching approach, rather than independent learning. It may be this pedagogical barrier which acts as significant constraint to the acceptance of VLE's, as well as the view that on-line activities are of lower 'value' than on-site ones.

Figure 3



Teacher's and student's perspectives on assessment (Biggs 2003) Evans and Jones (2006)

In their experiment with blended learning Evans and Jones (2006) agree with Biggs' view that what gets measured gets done, and built their blend around a principle of assessed participation (figure 3). Although the module team attempted to utilise podcasts in the same way, but with less success, the majority of the VLE was conceived as a menu of resources and activities for students to choose from. The statistics from the website indicates that making lectures and perhaps crucially the assignment exclusively on-line has, on the surface improved contact with the VLE. However it is reasonably clear from the small survey that the level of engagement in different VLE areas has not been of sufficient depth. Therefore in future these VLE's elements need to be more constructively aligned as indicated by Biggs (2003).

A number of authors Motteram (2006), Mitchell and Honore (2006) for example, state that creating "communities of practice" is an important success factor in building blended learning programmes. From our limited research we can see that this will be a significant hurdle for our students to overcome, as the established techniques for this (such as wikis or discussion areas) are not currently viewed as viable methods.

A popular myth among teachers is that the student population is extremely "new-media" orientated and competent. However the focus group discussions indicated that this isn't necessarily the case – some of our students had difficulty downloading podcasts as well as a lack of familiarity with new technology applications e.g. wiki's, and even a lack of engagement with websites. However, conversely, failure to make the VLE not only user friendly, but user efficient, results in a lack of engagement.

Conclusion

Students do use and value VLE's, but they need to be highly constructively aligned to the assessment and learning activities, of high 'use-ability' and be part of an enrichment rather than substitution strategy. The students themselves seem to be conservative adaptors of new teaching and learning technologies and techniques. The initial work here and elsewhere suggests a progressive, developmental approach with teaching leadership followed by student feedback.

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